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Harris County  
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Building a Healthy Community

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## Post Disaster Food Protection Guidelines

### For Food Establishments

During and after disasters, food establishments may be affected by power outages, flood water, contamination of the water supply, and structural damage to the building. Such damages may affect the safety of your food supply and the ability to prepare food in a safe and sanitary manner. Proper food handling and sanitation techniques will reduce the threat of food contamination and disease.

Health inspectors will visit all food establishments in the affected areas as soon as it is safe for them to travel. If the establishment has closed voluntarily, the health inspector will verify that the following conditions exist before food preparation operations can resume. The health inspector may ask the establishment to close if the food establishment has remained opened and unsanitary and unsafe conditions still exist.

#### Prior to resuming food operations:

- All unsafe, time/temperature control for safety (TCS) food has been thrown out or removed from service according to the directions below.
- Electricity and gas services are restored. All circuit breakers have been reset as needed.
- Septic system, if applicable, is functioning properly.
- All equipment and facilities are operating properly, including:
  - Lighting
  - Refrigeration
  - Hot holding
  - Ventilation
  - Toilet facilities
- Hot (minimum 100°F) and cold potable water, under pressure, is available for hand washing and proper dishwashing
- The condition of the physical structure of facility does not endanger the safe and sanitary handling of food and equipment.

#### Safety of Food after a Power Outage

Keep the refrigerator and freezer doors closed as much as possible to maintain the cold temperature.

#### Refrigerated Foods

- Throw out custards, gravies, creamed foods, chopped meats, poultry and seafood sandwich fillings if they have been without refrigeration for 2 hours.
- Throw out all other time/temperature control for safety (TCS) foods under refrigeration where temperatures have reached more than 41°F for a period of 4 hours or longer. Use your thermometer to check food temperatures.

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## Frozen Foods

- With the freezer door closed, food will usually stay frozen at least a day, perhaps 2 or 3 days, depending on the quantity of insulation. Food in well-fitted, well-insulated four-cubic-foot home freezers should not begin to spoil in fewer than 3 days. In 12-36 cubic foot freezers, food should not begin to spoil in fewer than 5 days.
- If it seems likely that your freezer will not be on for several days, dry ice may help keep your frozen food from spoiling. The more dry ice you use, the longer it will stay frozen. Dry ice is costly and may not be easy to get. If a power outage or flood is predicted and you want to use dry ice, find a source in advance. Follow basic safety procedures when using dry ice.
- Thawing rate depends on:
  - The amount of food in a freezer (a full freezer stays cold longer than one half full.)
  - The kind of food (a freezer filled with meats stays cold longer than a freezer filled with baked goods.)
  - The temperature of the food (the colder the food, the longer it will stay frozen.)
  - The freezer (a well-insulated freezer keeps food cold longer than one with little insulation.)
  - The size of the freezer (the larger the freezer, the longer the food stays cold.)
- If a frozen, time/temperature control for safety (TCS) food is thawed and is still at 41°F or below, the food may be cooked and used immediately.
- Some foods may be safely refrozen if they still contain ice crystals throughout the product or if they have been kept at 41°F or below for no more than 2 days.
- Ice cream and other dairy products must be destroyed and have no salvage value.

### **If flood water has covered, dripped, or seeped into a food package, throw it out.**

This includes:

- Fresh produce, meat, poultry, fish, and eggs.
- Cardboard boxes, even if the contents seem dry, including cereals, pasta products, rice, and salt.
- Any sealed packages within a large paper box. Paper or cellophane wrapped goods can collect filth or split at the seams making it virtually impossible to remove dirt or sanitize properly and therefore are not salvageable. This includes items such as: candies, cereals, bread, cakes, chewing gum, etc.
- All opened containers and packages; foods in bags or canisters
- Cans that are dented, leaking, bulging, or rusted
- Cans that have been tossed about and are far from their normal storage spot
- Food in glass jars, including unopened jars with waxed paper, cellophane or cloth covers.
- Shelled and unshelled nuts.
- Screw-top, crimped-cap and similar containers such as: canned soft drinks, beer, wine and other liquor products.
- Eggs whether frozen or in-shell. Kraut and pickles in process of manufacturing or in bulk (in open barrels) must be destroyed.
- Meats, whether smoked, fresh, salted except for canned meats, cannot be salvaged for human consumption.
- Spices that are shipped in containers such as paper or cardboard

## **Destruction of Unsafe Food**

- Remove and secure food to a designated condemned food storage area away from food preparation and equipment storage to prevent service to the public or accidental contamination of the facility or other food.
- If the food must be kept until the distributor can credit your facility, label the food clearly “not for sale.”
- You may store unsafe refrigerator food in a refrigerated location away from other food to hold for credit until picked up by the food supplier/distributor.

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- Document type and amount of food (and any other information your insurance company requires.) Your health inspector may ask for these records.
- You may destroy small volumes of food with a cleaning product (such as bleach) and discard in a covered trash container outside your facility.
- For large quantities of food, you may need to make arrangements with a waste disposal company or arrange for delivery to a licensed landfill.

**NOTE:** If you wish to sell your food to a salvage dealer, insure that the dealer is licensed by the state. You do not want any food from your establishment entering the food supply if it is not safe.

### **Clean and Sanitize All Food Preparation and Serving Areas**

- Dishes, kitchen utensils, whether in stock in a store or in a restaurant should be thoroughly washed of all filth and mud and disinfected or sanitized in a chlorine solution of 200 ppm ( 2 ounces of bleach per 1 gallon of water) for china or glass material. Immerse metal utensils and food equipment in boiling water for 10 minutes.
- Cracked dishes should be thrown away.

### **Water**

A food establishment must have a sufficient supply of potable (safe) water for hand washing, food preparation, equipment cleaning and sanitation and other food establishment operations.

### **Establishments Served By a Water Utility District**

Water utility districts will issue boil water notices or advocate not using the water if the water supply is unsafe. Contact your water utility district or the health department if you are unsure whether your water supply has been affected and you have not heard from the utility district.

### **Establishments Served by Wells**

Do not use your water if the well has been flooded. Use proper procedures to chlorinate the well. Your health inspector will advise you on proper chlorination procedures and sampling requirements before water may be used.

**Refer to the Texas Food Establishment Rules for a complete set of requirements to operate a food establishment.**

**Please call Harris County Public Health (713) 274-6300** if you have any questions regarding any issues related to a disaster. We are here to help you insure that your food operations will be safe and sanitary and to help you resume business as soon as possible after the disaster.

If phone service has been interrupted, you will be redirected to another number by your health inspector or the news media.

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